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Butler Receives Fulbright-Hays Fellowship for Research on Water Justice and Resistance to Dams

Summary: Christopher Butler, instructor of English, sociology and honors, was recently awarded a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Fellowship for his project “Water Unites, Water Divides: Resistance to the West Seti and Upper Karnali Dams in Nepal.”

(October 2, 2012)—Christopher Butler, instructor of English, sociology and honors, was recently awarded a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad (DDRA) Fellowship for work he is conducting as a graduate student at the University of California, Santa Cruz. The title of the project for which he received the fellowship—which officially begins in the summer of 2013—is “Water Unites, Water Divides: Resistance to the West Seti and Upper Karnali Dams in Nepal.”

The Fulbright-Hays DDRA Fellowship Program provides opportunities for doctoral candidates to engage in full-time dissertation research in modern foreign languages and area studies abroad. Designed to contribute to the development and improvement of modern foreign language and area studies in the United States, the program provides grants to individual doctoral students conducting research abroad for periods of up to 12 months.

Butler’s research will focus on the construction of two hydroelectric dams in western Nepal—one at West Seti, the other at Upper Karnali. Once constructed, the dams are expected to promote rural electrification while providing significant revenue for the federal government in a country where revenue is otherwise relatively low. The dams, however, will also drastically alter the flow of the river, and, subsequently, displace a large number of riverside inhabitants, many of whom do not own the land on which they live and farm. This question of land ownership is likely to significantly complicate the compensation process for displaced families.

As a result of these potential realities, resistance to the projects has surfaced at both sites. While resistance at West Seti has been relatively peaceful, that at Upper Karnali has been violent, in spite of similarities between the two populations. The source of this discrepancy remains to be identified, and it is Butler’s hope that he will be able to do so. He does, however, remain open to the idea of pursuing new possibilities once he reaches Nepal.

“You propose to [the U.S. Department of Education] the idea of what your questions are going to be, but the reality of fieldwork is that you often end up answering questions you didn’t know you had,” Butler notes.

As an academic, Butler believes he not only has the opportunity to address questions that have and will come out of his experience in Nepal, but also an obligation to do so.

“I think every faculty member would agree with this, that as academics we have a responsibility to ask the difficult questions, and we have a responsibility to answer them to the best of our ability. Trying to make a more equitable world as possible, we have to go out and answer the difficult questions.” Invoking the words of Amartya Sen, professor of economics and philosophy at Harvard University, Butler goes on to note that an aim of this project is to “give every person a life worth living, which is ultimately the goal of this sort of inquiry.”

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